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## Remembering American Wars in Three Controversial Displays: The Wall, the Enola Gay, and the Vietnam Era Educational Center

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REMEMBERING AMERICAN WARS IN THREE CONTROVERSIAL DISPLAYS:  
THE WALL, THE *ENOLA GAY*, AND THE VIETNAM ERA EDUCATIONAL  
CENTER

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A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of American Studies

The College of William & Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

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by

Joanna E. Pleasant

2001

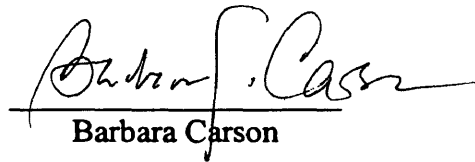
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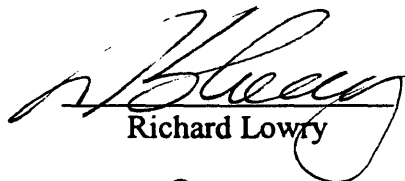
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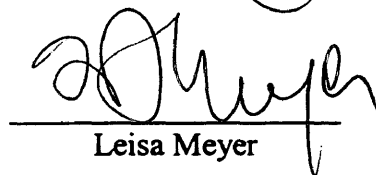
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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to examine the process behind the debates over how war and wartime events are represented in museums and memorials. This thesis focuses on the controversies emerging around three separate war-related exhibits/memorials: the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, the *Enola Gay* Exhibit at the National Air and Space Museum, and the Vietnam Era Educational Center in Holmdel, New Jersey.

The intention of this thesis is to analyze the complex politics surrounding issues of individual and collective memory and the historical representation of war. The resulting research supports an argument for a new approach to public presentations of wartime events which encourages debate and open discussion.

The *Enola Gay* controversy serves as the centerpiece for the discussion of this topic. The Congressional Hearings held in relation to the failed exhibition reveal the potential chilling factor that intense political involvement can have in the engaged museum environment.

Rather than fearing the conflicting perspectives and emotions that multiple people bring to any memorial or museum, curators, scholars, veterans, and politicians should relish the opportunity to hear as many different realities as possible and to catalog them all for the human record. Mounting a successful exhibition in the future means acknowledging the fact that there are many stories to be told and making every effort not to privilege one over the other.

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## Introduction

The act of remembering war is surrounded by a complex set of emotions. The glory of victory, the sadness of loss, the brutality of violence - all of these complicate attempts to memorialize war. The harsh reality of war makes it difficult to celebrate, perhaps explaining why most war memorials are statues, plaques or monuments - silent, simple symbols of lives lost and battles won. Given the ubiquity of the United States' peace-time armed forces, and the country's status as one of the world's "super powers," many veterans and politicians have moved to protest the construction of memorials and exhibits that challenge the reasons for and outcomes of American wars.

This thesis argues for a new approach to public presentations of wartime events which encourages debate and open discussion. Using oral histories, photographs, government documents and artifacts to tell the stories of war, but also inviting historians, veterans and others to interpret war in many ways will benefit museum visitors. A broader and deeper exploration of war is necessary to ensure that no single voice is privileged and that the multiple truths that surround any event can be revealed. This thesis examines the process behind the debates over how wars and wartime events are represented in museums and memorials. It involves researching the historiography that influences the interpretations of events offered in museum exhibitions as well as the ways in which the concept of collective memory shapes responses to such exhibits.

This thesis focuses on the controversies emerging around three separate war-related exhibits/ memorials: the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, the National Air and Space Museum's *Enola Gay* exhibit, and the New Jersey Vietnam Veterans Educational Center.



The intention of this thesis is to analyze the complex politics surrounding issues of individual and collective memory and the historical representation of war.

War arouses conflict, not only among the combatant nations, but also among those who would revile it, commemorate it, oppose it, support it, study it and analyze it. War is fascinating precisely because humankind seems to be unable to stop it from happening no matter how irrational or unnecessary they deem it to be upon reflection. War is a paradox: one group of people dies to ensure that other groups of people do not perish. Does human life even enter the equation? Is war really about ideology, religion, ownership, or real estate? Historians and scholars have long struggled to answer these questions, to explain war, to justify its continuous occurrence throughout human history. It is necessary and important to pursue the meanings behind war and to discuss all possibilities in order to uncover the realities of conflict.

There are many forums for the examination of historically significant events such as war. The most significant arenas for this study are the museum and the memorial. These are the places in the United States where people can go to see the nation's history on display. They commemorate everything from the birth of the nation and westward expansion to the injustice of slavery and the courage of those who participated in the civil rights movement. War has touched every part of this country. The American Revolution, the Civil War, World War I, World War II, Korea, and Vietnam - all of these conflicts, and others more recent or less frequently mentioned, took American lives. All of these conflicts affected the way everyday Americans lived, whether it meant defending their homes against British troops in 1778, or fleeing to British lines as slaves to gain

their freedom in that same war, or rationing food to provide more for Americans fighting in Europe in 1944. Consequently, when Americans talk about war, they remember different things. How is it possible to capture the perspectives of thousands of people who all remember a war in their own unique way?

War is what historian Arthur Neal calls a “national trauma.” Such traumas “become ingrained in collective memories . . . Hearing or reading about an event does not have the same implications as experiencing an event directly. However, as parts of the social heritage, events from the past become selectively embedded in collective memories.”<sup>1</sup> It is, therefore, possible for almost anyone to participate in the collective memory of an event, particularly in the mass media driven world of the early twenty-first century. One of the best examples of how Americans in particular participate in collective memory is the “Where were you when . . .” question. “Where were you when JFK was assassinated?” “Where were you when MLK, Jr. was assassinated?” “Where were you when the *Challenger* exploded?” These three events, in large part because of the turbulence they created in society, elicit responses that indicate people have incorporated those experiences into their memory, and that they “tap a responsive chord in mass audiences.”<sup>2</sup> The public is becoming more and more involved in interpreting history, and they will not rely on the expertise of the museum alone to explain the past to them. Museums can no longer rely on their authority as institutions to qualify them as

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<sup>1</sup>Arthur G. Neal, National Trauma and Collective Memory: Major Events in the American Century. (London: M.E. Sharpe), 6.

<sup>2</sup>Neal 203.

experts in any one particular field of study, the art of exhibition included. Interest groups, politicians, museum visitors, curators and museum administrators each have their own ideas about how history, art, and artifacts should be exhibited. The public's idea of how historical exhibits should be mounted is sometimes very different from the scholar's focus. As scholars Amy Henderson and Adrienne Kaeppler note, "historians want to use archives and objects; [where] the public more often turns to memory, personal connections, and family stories, . . . historians are careful to assess the bias of their sources [and] to question evidence . . ."<sup>3</sup> In short, while individuals who were party to a certain event have their own distinct memory of that event, historians must decide not just which of these individual's stories should be highlighted, but also whether or not there is a single truth about any historical event. The question of exactly what is "historically true" has been the source of great debate and the effects of this controversy have been felt in the museum community.

The museum exhibit is a powerful mode of presenting American history. A visit to a museum can be a very enlightening experience, for "the displayed collection finds its unity in memory and narrative."<sup>4</sup> Steven Lubar, curator of the exhibit "World War II: Sharing Memories" at the National Museum of American History, focuses on the importance of incorporating memory into historical exhibits. Lubar contends that

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<sup>3</sup>Henderson & Kaeppler, 16.

<sup>4</sup>Susan Stewart, "Death and Life, in that Order, in the Works of Charles Wilson Peale," The Cultures of Collecting (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994), 204.

“memory is how we connect with our individual past. It serves our own purposes.”<sup>5</sup>

When memory is combined with pertinent historical narrative, including newspaper articles and news reels, and with scholarly research that includes government documents, a more representative, thorough exhibit results. Museums serve the greatest number of people by creating an exhibit with which they can identify and educating them by including the latest scholarship, which might be profoundly different from their remembrance of any given event.

Museum visitors should not be alienated by an exhibit that does not resonate with their memories; they are more likely to be willing to expand their horizons if their perspective of an event is acknowledged. Lubar agrees; to him the “goal of a history exhibit is to move people from the ideas and information that they bring with them to the exhibit to a more complex, problematized, and nuanced view of the past.”<sup>6</sup> The disjunction between memory and history can be breeched by incorporating both, and smoothing the transition with a narrative that stretches the viewers’ memories of an event without disregarding their personal connections. Exhibits of the American and Japanese homefronts during the final days of World War II, for example, would have made a critical impact on a visitor to the *Enola Gay* exhibit at the National Air and Space Museum. Such additions would have provided insight into how the Japanese were personally effected by the use of nuclear weapons at the close of the war. Pictures or

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<sup>5</sup>Amy Henderson & Adrienne L. Kaeppler, eds., Exhibiting Dilemmas: Issues of Representation at the Smithsonian, “Exhibiting Memories,” by Steven Lubar (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1997), 15.

<sup>6</sup>Henderson & Kaeppler, 16.

recreations of settings or scenes are particularly important because place memory helps “citizens [to] define their public pasts: places trigger memories for insiders . . . and at the same time places often can represent shared pasts to outsiders who might be interested in knowing about them in the present.”<sup>7</sup> Visitors could identify with the effects of the war on all phases of life if more than just the impact felt by those in combat was presented.

Education of the visitor is a critical goal of any museum experience. In their book titled The Museum Experience, John Falk and Lynn Dierking emphasize that learning is “the consolidation and slow, incremental growth of existing ideas and information.”<sup>8</sup> Therefore, those who learn the most from an exhibit are those who come in with basic knowledge of the subject matter or a high interest level in the particular area of study being presented. They are most likely to carefully read label text and ponder historical information that is new to them. These individuals are probably also more likely to have had a previous personal experience, including knowledge gained from relatives, with the subject matter. In relating this concept of “learning” to military exhibits, the needs and expectations of visitors become more apparent: veterans and their families want an exhibit that reflects what they see as their memory of the events; historians and curators want an exhibit with which visitors can identify, but they also need to utilize current scholarship to discuss events because the multiple truths that surround any event constantly reveal new insights into its causes and consequences. It is possible and

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<sup>7</sup>Dolores Hayden, The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1996), 46.

<sup>8</sup>Lynn Dierking and John Falk, eds. The Museum Experience. (New York: Whalesback Books, 1992), 98.

necessary to incorporate memories, historical objects, and narrative into a successful and accurate museum exhibition.

Because museums rely on historical scholarship to explain the significance of the objects (photographs, clothing, weapons, planes) they are displaying, the museum and the historian are intimately linked. Until the early 1970's, most museums or museum presentations of history were through the consensus school of history. Consensus history emerged in the 1950's because of "the new American position in the world, the memories of national unity in World War II, the pressures of the Cold War, and the confidence of most Americans that they could now participate in a rapidly growing prosperity."<sup>9</sup> Consensus historians asserted that there is a fundamental unity in American society despite all of the outward conflicts; "tradition, seen as a common core of ideas and experiences and supportive of the concept of the nation as a whole"<sup>10</sup> ranks over the vision of an ideal democracy as a shaping force; there is a single national narrative, and the dominant voice in that narrative belongs to the wealthy and politically powerful white man. Thus consensus school historians most often studied the lives of prominent individuals and their contributions to history. Consensus historians rarely challenged the 'why' of historical events and tended to produce scholarship that was remarkably consistent with the views presented in the 'official' histories produced by government sources.

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<sup>9</sup>Ernst Breisach, Historiography: Ancient, Medieval, and Modern (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 387.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid.

However, consensus scholarship was largely eclipsed by revisionist scholarship in the 1970's. It was at this point that the museum began its still ongoing transformation from a temple for enshrining artifacts to a forum for the discussion of an artifact's significance.<sup>11</sup> The revisionist school of history developed during the late 1960's and challenged the unified outlook on history constructed by the consensus scholars - they were specifically disenchanted with the consensus school's unquestioning acceptance of what revisionists saw as Washington propaganda. Revisionists were disillusioned by the failure of other historians to challenge the status quo; they recognized the need to talk about groups of people rather than individuals.

Emerging from the social history focus of the '60's and '70's, many historians in the late 1970's found that "a purely white, elitist cultural diet [was] no longer tenable or desirable."<sup>12</sup> Multiculturalist scholars further diversified the many perspectives on history. Historians with the multicultural viewpoint are not satisfied with the Revisionist/Consensus debate over the history of dominant individuals and cultures because multicultural scholars argue against a single national narrative, and encourage the exploration and representation of groups that have been ignored by historians - these groups include, among others, the poor, African-Americans, women, Native Americans, Hispanic/Latino Americans and Asian-Americans. Multiculturalism has the potential to

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<sup>11</sup>Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine, eds., Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display, "Museums and Multiculturalism" (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 3.

<sup>12</sup>Peter N. Stearns, Multiculturalism: Meaning Over Memory - Recasting the Teaching of Culture and History (Chapel Hill: UNC-CH Press, 1993), 6.

greatly influence the museum community by causing its members to “explore this multicultural and intercultural terrain consciously and deliberately, in spite of the snares that may await, . . . reflecting and mediating the claims of various groups and perhaps help[ing] construct a new idea of ourselves as a nation.”<sup>13</sup>

Analyzing one war memorial and specific military history exhibits at two museums reveals the necessity of adopting a multicultural approach to history in order to convey the stories of as many different people as possible. The experiences of those on the homefront, in field hospitals, on the supply lines and on the battlefield in wartime are as important as those of the president, the generals, and others in positions of power. Historians and scholars who seek to reveal the lapses in American history do so to educate the public about the many possible interpretations of the past, and to warn those who would hide the mistakes of the country that they are in fact perpetuating a dangerous self-righteousness. Historian Martin Sherwin captured the essence of this problem when he said, “Those who insist on only their memories of the past, condemn others to remain ignorant of it.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>Karp and Lavine, 6.

<sup>14</sup>Martin Sherwin, “Hiroshima as Politics and History,” *The Journal of American History*, Vol.82, No.3 (December 1995):1091.



## Exhibiting Controversy

The debate about different interpretations of American history spills over into the museum world and ignites controversies over “value-laden presentation,” “questionable interpretation,” and a lack of divergent viewpoints. In other words, using objects to forward a personal or political viewpoint or privileging one group’s story over another’s, as this thesis will show, can and does cause controversy. These disputes, sometimes initiated by historians and sometimes by special interest groups, have pushed museum officials to rethink, and often rework, exhibitions. Something as simple as the placement of an object in an exhibit or in the museum can become a thorn in the side of any curator.<sup>15</sup> Lighting, label text and object choice go a long way in subtly (or sometimes blatantly) revealing a curator’s historical and scholarly opinion about her or his subject. Designing an exhibition to reflect a single opinion about an event or era is difficult at best and always invites controversy. This dilemma has been seen everywhere from the “The West as America” exhibit at the National Museum of American Art to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art exhibit of Nazi-confiscated “Degenerate” Art to Colonial Williamsburg’s presentation of eighteenth century slave life. Museums dealing with American history in particular find that they are continuously confronted with a past “shot

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<sup>15</sup>In his essay, “Exhibiting Intention,” Michael Baxandall notes that the mere placement of an object “by itself or on a wall . . . [makes it] worthy of inspection . . . for its cultural importance . . . It is spotlighted for some purpose.” Highlighting one object privileges it in an exhibit and sets the tone for the viewer’s perception of the exhibit as a whole and the museum. Baxandall’s essay is found in Karp and Lavine’s Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display. (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 34.

through with social, cultural, generational, economic, and psychological conflicts.”<sup>16</sup>

Military history exhibits, including the three discussed in this analysis, have been especially controversial because of the implied association of glorious victory with death and violence, and the memories of living veterans who want to see the war displayed and discussed the way they remember it. Even those war exhibits which receive generally positive reviews from the majority of visitors will still receive some negative feedback. “Gone for a Soldier: Transformed by War,” a temporary exhibit at the Atlanta History Center is one example of an exhibition which received both positive and negative feedback from visitors. Though the exhibit presented information which revealed the harshness of being a soldier in the Civil War, it neglected to include the important roles of women in its examination and it marginalized the efforts of black soldiers.<sup>17</sup>

The 1979 crusade to establish a memorial for Vietnam Veterans, the 1995 exhibition of the *Enola Gay*, the recently opened Vietnam Veterans Memorial Museum in Holmdel, NJ, and other controversial exhibitions of war-related memorabilia have pushed veterans, politicians, historians, and museum curators into a battle of their own. Whose history will be privileged in the effort to bring the events of war to the American public? Whose story will be told? What perspective will be taken? How will wars of the past be remembered in museums, and how will that visual memory affect future generations?

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<sup>16</sup>Thomas J. Schlereth, Cultural History and Material Culture: Everyday Life, Landscapes, Museums (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1990), 362.

<sup>17</sup>Jim Cullen, review of “Gone for a Soldier: Transformed by the War,” at the Atlanta History Center, *The Journal of American History*, Vol.82 No.3 (December 1995):1151-4.

War is most often represented through exhibits of weaponry, uniforms, and memorabilia like letters, drawings, and photographs. American conflicts from the Revolutionary War through World War II are presented this way, even in the National Museum of American History. Sterile glass cases house uniforms on mannequins - the faded tattered reds and blues of the War for American Independence, the blues and grays of the American Civil War, the drab gray-green of the First and Second World Wars. Swords, some in their sheaths, some bare, are polished like-new. The development of gunpowder weapons can be traced from flintlock muskets and cannons through to modern-day artillery. Everything is washed clean; there is no blood on the bayonets, nor are their stains on any of the uniforms. What are the implications of displaying a uniform in which someone died? The power of associating an object with the end of an individual's life is most often avoided in military history museums. In the Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, D.C. the room of shoes reminds the visitor that the people who owned those shoes died in the Nazi concentration camps. The impact is powerful and lasting - the image of the shoes stacked high to the ceiling is difficult to forget. Why not, then, display a bloodied uniform as a reminder that war inevitably means death for some of those who fight in it? War represented in museums has often been antiseptic - one could argue that presenting those artifacts is a way of cleansing the collective American soul. Displaying clean uniforms, neatly pressed and worn by mannequins makes war seem more civilized and less brutal. Though it would seem to contradict most veterans' wishes for an accurate representation of war, the lack of bloodied uniforms seems to glorify the "fighting man" by making him seem above injury.

Until recently, the general public had never seen a more realistic view of war in a museum.

In addition to weapons and uniforms the most common other memorabilia to be displayed are letters and pictorial representations of war. The War Memorial Museum in Hampton, VA, along with its conventional chronological exhibit of conflicts involving American troops, houses one of the largest collections of World War II propaganda posters in the country. Many military posts house celebratory museums on their premises, including the Army Transportation Museum in Fort Eustis, VA, the 82nd Airborne Museum at Ft. Bragg, NC, the Museum of the Infantry at Ft. Benning, GA, the Gulf War Museum at Ft. Stewart, GA, and the Quartermaster's Museum at Ft. A.P. Hill, VA. There are thousands of monuments and memorials as well. Washington, D.C. is the site of the Korean War Memorial, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, and the National Air and Space Museum, which some would argue actually serves as a monument to American air power, the Cold War, and the space race. Battlefield sites from the Revolutionary and Civil War are scattered up and down the east coast and in the west and southwest regions of the United States, marked prominently with road signs and often further commemorated with visitor centers, walking tours, and re-enactments. These are sacred ground to many Americans, which was proved most recently in 1993-94 when Disney announced a plan to open a history theme park in Prince William County, Virginia which would include the Manassas battlefield. Public outcry from groups including the Chesapeake Bay Foundation, the Southern Environmental Law Center, and the American Farmland Trust against the commercialization of history, among other concerns, forced

Disney to abandon the idea even though they had won local and state approval for the park<sup>18</sup>.

Perhaps the significance of memorializing war exists in the desire of many Americans to find common threads to bind them as a people. The history of the United States is strongly linked to wars from its founding to the present. Through a war the United States was established as a free nation, and the current military force is one factor that enables the nation to remain a major world power. When the history of American warfare is reconsidered by historians and scholars as new evidence emerges, many Americans cannot help feeling that the historical rug is being pulled out from under them. Though their “memories may contribute to the construction of history . . . history does not necessarily validate (those) memor[ies].”<sup>19</sup> To some observers, the distance between their memories and history threatens to diminish the sacrifice made by so many during wartime.

Most curators have an agenda for their exhibits: a specific lesson must be taught, a particular myth exploded, an individual exalted or reviled. A select group of people, including, but certainly not limited to, curators and museum administrators, decides what to present and how to present it. With this power comes a great deal of responsibility - if one story or event or person is to be privileged in an exhibit then the reason for that must be clear. When people feel that their stories are not important, that the emotions and

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<sup>18</sup>Michael P. Brooks, “Getting Goofy in Virginia: The Politics of Disneyfication.” <http://www.asu.edu/caed/proceedings97/brooks.html>, 1997.

<sup>19</sup>Sherwin, 1091.

memories being presented are not theirs, then they will challenge the curator's choice. This is particularly true "in the arena of contemporary history"<sup>20</sup> . . . [where] audiences have more connection with a historical moment."<sup>21</sup> Visitors for whom a particular event, in this case war, has direct meaning "may be less likely to defer to curatorial prerogative . . . [and] this sense of ownership creates a wave of criticism that museums are often unable to handle."<sup>22</sup>

According to Elaine Heumann Gurian, "an exhibition is a cultural artifice that articulates a producer's visions, biases, and concerns . . . [and] allows the contemplation of the exhibition content."<sup>23</sup> She goes on to compare the mounting of an exhibition to the production of a theater piece; "exhibitions are formed by a group of people who have highly individualized visions and styles, in a process in which compromise is the order of the day."<sup>24</sup> That same group of people use their beliefs and values to make decisions "to emphasize one element and to downplay others, to assert some truths and to ignore

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<sup>20</sup>For the purposes of this study, contemporary history is defined as the time period from World War II to the present; this also represents the period which many living today still remember from their experiences.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid, 153.

<sup>22</sup>Amy Henderson & Adrienne L. Kaeppler, eds., Exhibiting Dilemmas: Issues of Representation at the Smithsonian, "Curating the Recent Past: The Woolworth Lunch Counter, Greensboro, North Carolina," by William Yeingst & Lonnie G. Bunch (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1997), 152.

<sup>23</sup>Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine, eds., Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display, "Noodling Around with Exhibition Opportunities," by Elaine Heumann Gurian (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1991), 178.

<sup>24</sup>Karp and Lavine, 188.

others.”<sup>25</sup> The same holds true for the creators of the three controversial military ‘exhibits’ this thesis will examine.<sup>26</sup> The term creator refers not only to the curators and historians who write label text and design displays, it also refers to the artists who push the concepts, the politicians, veterans groups, and individuals who attempt to insert their own agendas into the construction process, and those who work tirelessly to compromise and to bring a critical message to the viewing public in spite of all obstacles.

### **The Three Exhibits**

The “Wall,” or the Vietnam Memorial, was intended to be a memorial to those who died in Vietnam. Jan Scruggs and his fellow veterans specifically wanted a remembrance that did not reference foreign policy decisions - the absence of an American flag or some other patriotic symbol in their design of choice was deliberate.<sup>27</sup> In turn, the National Air and Space Museum’s curators wanted to use the *Enola Gay* as the centerpiece of “an historical treatment of the use of atomic weapons [coupled] with the 50th anniversary commemoration of the end of the war.”<sup>28</sup> Finally, the Vietnam Era Educational Center curators wanted to present the war abroad and at home in a balanced

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<sup>25</sup>Karp and Lavine, 1.

<sup>26</sup>Though the Vietnam Veterans Memorial (The Wall) is not truly an exhibit, I will call it one for the purposes of this analysis because of the clear way in which it introduces the primary elements and players in subsequent controversies over the exhibition of military artifacts.

<sup>27</sup>“Facts About the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Collection,” The Vietnam Veterans Memorial Reader’s Series, <http://www.nps.gov/mrc/reader/vvmcr.htm>

<sup>28</sup>I. Michael Heyman, Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, in a news conference held January 30, 1995.

context with respect for all parties.<sup>29</sup> All of these goals were foiled or stalled by the agendas of politicians and veterans groups.

The fate of these three exhibits raises questions that will most likely never have complete answers. How can exhibits relate one person's memory of an event to the historical "facts" of the event? Does memory become truth when it symbolizes something significant for a particular community? Is history complete without the use of memories? What, exactly, is memory? Is it only individual? Is there such a thing as collective memory? In his book, Arthur G. Neal traces the existence of a collective memory back to before the founding of the United States of America:

Humans take an active part in determining what their collective memories will be . . . [they] may be thought of as a storehouse of information on how problems were confronted and solved in the past . . . Collective memories thus incorporate not only the tragedies of the past, but also the heroic accomplishments . . . [and] are drawn upon to tap a responsive chord in mass audiences . . . to support a political position or to document the urgency of avoiding a particular line of action . . . The significance of collective memories lies less in their accuracy than in the meanings they have for their adherents.<sup>30</sup>

Memory is not merely an individual's perception of an event. Even groups of people who witnessed the same event remember it in different ways, though their collective memories may be similar. The proliferation of media influences collective memory by using a particular vision of an event to communicate a broad message about its impact. There are several readily identifiable instances of this occurrence. The footage of Buddhist monks immolating themselves to protest the Vietnam war and the

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<sup>29</sup>The Vietnam Era Educational Center Brochure

<sup>30</sup>Neal, 202-6.



picture of the young Vietnamese child who was caught in a napalm attack are two provocative examples. It is difficult to erase the images of men sitting calmly while their bodies are engulfed in flames or of the naked child running down the road, her skin hanging off her body like tattered clothing. Fictional representations of war in movies like *The Big Red One* and *A Bridge Too Far*, evoke heroic sentiments about World War II, while films like *Saving Private Ryan* and *The Thin Red Line* depict men, some good and some not so good, who struggle to justify their presence in a bloody conflict. These pictures and movies help shape impressions of war for those who have never experienced it - people who were not there and who have never participated in a war effort may even feel as though they have missed a critical part of the "American experience." These films, some based on truth, others romanticized visions, are as much a part of the collective memory of any war as the oral history of those who were there.

Military history, already riddled with government documents, policy makers, and casualties, also carries the burden of justification. It is important to address questions of mission, purpose, consequences, and sacrifices. Government documents may provide a running commentary on the decision-making process, but they offer only the official and possibly propagandistic perspective, and do not tell us what it was like to be there in the line of fire, how difficult it was to keep the troops constantly supplied with vehicles and ammunition, or how those on the homefront were experiencing work environments they had never had access to before the war. Memory is a critical and necessary part of history. There is no one single, absolute truth - memories prove that each person remembers the same event from a different perspective. To accommodate the many,

varying viewpoints curators must remember that no history is complete without the addition of memories, individual and collective.

### **The Wall - The Vietnam Veterans Memorial**

Bringing the history of armed conflict out of the standard, celebratory military history museum setting and into a more broadly public arena has sparked a debate about how to depict the brutality and reality of war without denigrating those who risked their lives for the cause. War artifacts and memorials become symbolic of the political turmoil that is associated with conflict in general. Vietnam veteran Jan Scruggs, Jr. first envisioned a Vietnam Veterans Memorial in 1979, after he realized that for “the faces of the dead and . . . their names . . . there were to be no memorials, no public images that might rally a nation or comfort those who lived on.”<sup>31</sup> He returned home one evening after seeing *The Deerhunter* and was inspired by “the possibility of a community healing itself.”<sup>32</sup> He and fellow veteran Tom Carhart wanted a memorial that would allow Vietnam veterans to be honored and remembered without reference to United States foreign policy. A competition, funded by Ross Perot, was held for the design of the memorial, and in May 1981 a panel of jurors selected from among approximately 1,500 entries what quickly became a controversial submission. Vietnam veteran Lewis B. Puller, Jr., son of the famous and highly decorated Marine ‘Chesty’ Puller, described his

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<sup>31</sup>Edward T. Linenthal & Tom Engelhardt, eds., History Wars: The *Enola Gay* and Other Battles for the American Past, “The Victors and the Vanquished,” by Tom Engelhardt ( New York: Metropolitan Books, 1996), 218.

<sup>32</sup>Kristin Ann Hass, Carried to the Wall: American Memory and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1998), 10.

initial impressions of the memorial:

As I read about the winning entry, designed by a woman undergraduate at Yale named Maya Lin, I pictured two black walls containing the names of all those killed in Vietnam. The walls were going to form a V shape and be built into a hillside on the Mall one arm pointing toward the Lincoln Memorial and the other toward the Washington Monument. It seemed like a perfectly appropriate, albeit unconventional, design to me, although I would have preferred that it had been submitted by a Vietnam veteran. Little did I realize that a major battle would take place before the memorial became a reality.<sup>33</sup>

The flurry of controversy that followed was set in motion by veterans, including Carhart, and others who felt that the memorial was “insufficiently patriotic.”<sup>34</sup> This group of veterans, along with some congress people, members of the Reagan administration, and Perot desired a “heroic memorial.” Opponents of the wall design attacked Maya Lin’s creation as a “mass grave” and a “black gash of shame,” and intervened in the process by blocking a construction permit for the memorial. In the end, a “heroic statue and an American flag” were placed near Maya Lin’s wall. The fact that Lin was Asian, like the Vietnamese, and female, and therefore ineligible for combat, was certainly a part of the controversy. Puller himself admitted that he would rather a Vietnam veteran had designed the memorial. Many found it difficult to imagine that a female who had never experienced the horror of the war could possibly communicate the grief and loss that so many had experienced. To placate the protestors, a statue of three soldiers was added to the memorial, which Lin protested, saying “that it was like ‘drawing a moustache’ on her

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<sup>33</sup>Puller, Lewis B, Jr. Fortunate Son. New York: Bantam Books, 1991.

<sup>34</sup>Marilyn B. Young, The Vietnam Wars: 1945-1990 (New York: Harper Perennial, 1991), 328.

design.”<sup>35</sup> Officials and their followers who preferred “to commemorate the Vietnam War in the ideal language of patriotism rather than the real language of grief and sorrow”<sup>36</sup> won the day. Since the wall’s dedication in 1982, streams of people have visited the memorial daily, some to find the names of friends and loved ones lost in the conflict, others to stare awestruck at the desolation of those two granite slabs bearing more than 50,000 names of Americans missing and dead in the sixteen years that America was in Vietnam.

Though most see what has become known simply as “The Wall” as a memorial to those who served in Vietnam, there are others who have tapped into its significance and have used the memorial as a site for protests against conflicts that seem similar, like the American involvement in El Salvador in the 1980’s. The sometimes disparate visions of Scruggs and his fellow veterans are easily projected onto current events by those who seek to link the political aspects of a past conflict with present day policy issues.

### **The *Enola Gay***

The controversy surrounding the Vietnam Veterans Memorial was simply a prelude to future debates over the appropriate representation of war. When the *Enola Gay* sat rusting on an air strip from 1953 to 1960, many veterans were outraged. However, none of them could agree on the appropriate way to exhibit the historically significant plane. In 1970 Barry Goldwater declared that the plane did not belong in the

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<sup>35</sup>Young, 328.

<sup>36</sup>John Bodnar, Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 14.

National Air and Space Museum (NASM). In the same year, Congressman Frank Thompson stated that he would be offended to see it exhibited in any museum, even one run by the Air Force. The *Enola Gay* spent almost fifty years in isolation because the very presence of the plane evoked an almost unspeakable act. When the decision was finally made to exhibit the *Enola Gay* at the National Air and Space Museum (NASM), the plane was meant to be the centerpiece of an exhibit that linked the Cold War and nuclear proliferation to the explosion of the first atomic bomb over Hiroshima:

The curators at the NASM were eager to present the *Enola Gay*, the B-29 bomber that dropped the first atomic bomb on Hiroshima, as the central icon in an exhibit that was to examine the bomb's creation, the decision to use it against Japanese cities, the *Enola Gay*'s mission, the ground-level effects of atomic weaponry, the bomb's role in ending the war, and the new era it inaugurated - as well as the ways in which decades of historical research and debate on these topics had altered and deepened our understanding of them.<sup>37</sup>

The response to this proposal is a recent example of how divergent viewpoints on a historical event can alter the way it is presented to and received by the public. The veterans were expecting an exhibit that celebrated the end of World War II and the defeat of the Japanese, not an in-depth investigation into the effects of nuclear armament. By employing discoveries made in recently declassified paperwork, the initial exhibit script challenged longstanding historical data about the reasons for using atomic weapons and the decisions that President Truman made leading up to the *Enola Gay*'s mission. It came as no surprise to Martin O. Harwit, the NASM director forced to resign in the midst of the controversy, that many, including the Japanese, viewed the future exhibit with skepticism:

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<sup>37</sup>Linenthal & Engelhardt, 2.

No group was prepared to trust the museum to tell its story the way it had always been told and the way it *always had to be told*, if honor was to be maintained . . . The originators of an exhibition have responsibility for taking into account the latest scholarship, to be sure, but they must also gauge their audience.<sup>38</sup>

Harwit intended to mount an exhibition that would honor everyone's memories while exposing them to new truths about the events surrounding the end of World War II. His plan proved to be impossible in the political climate at the Smithsonian Institution. Whatever support had existed for the exhibit during the planning stages in the early nineties disappeared when the first script was publicized. The debate that raged around this exhibit exemplified "the confrontation between popular memory and patriotic affirmation on the one hand, and the norms of historical research on the other."<sup>39</sup> Like the Vietnam veterans memorial before it, the *Enola Gay* exhibit plan was stalled by a lengthy review process. The report of the "Tiger Team," a group invited by Harwit to review the script and which was chaired by retired Brigadier General William Constantine and included several Air Force veterans, called the exhibit unbalanced and accused the original script's authors of being overly sympathetic to the Japanese, portraying them as victims rather than aggressors.<sup>40</sup> Ultimately, neither side emerged victorious. The museum, facing budget cuts and the threat of congressional oversight, scrapped the

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<sup>38</sup>Martin Harwit, "Academic Freedom in 'The Last Act'," *The Journal of American History*, Vol.82, No. 3 (December 1995): 1072.

<sup>39</sup>Edward T. Linenthal and Tom Engelhardt, eds., History Wars: The Enola Gay and other Battles for the American Past, "Whose History is it Anyway?: Memory, Politics, and Historical Scholarship," by Paul Boyer ( New York: Metropolitan Books, 1996), 137-8.

<sup>40</sup>Tiger Team Report citation

original script, attempted a rewrite which, though much better, was also denied, eventually abandoned any attempt to address the nuclear issue, and instead went with a bare-bones exhibit on the restoration of the plane.

In their quest to present an exhibit that challenged the popular American memory of the end of World War II, the curators at the NASM relied heavily on historians' debates about the accuracy of facts surrounding the decision to drop the bomb. Among the most highly contested pieces of information offered by the exhibit were the casualty estimates that would have resulted from a land invasion of the home island of Japan. New research shows that those figures were not unanimously agreed upon, and that there was evidence that Japanese leaders were making motions to surrender so the bomb was unnecessary. Moreover, theories that Truman dropped the bomb to threaten the Soviets are gaining more credence. This issue became a hot button for veterans groups and politicians opposed to the *Enola Gay* exhibit because to them the initial script seemed to devalue the lives that were saved because of the two atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Some historians were not content to allow their carefully researched revisions of historical events to be overshadowed by the widely accepted memory of the factors behind Truman's decision to use atomic weapons in the Pacific Theater of World War II. As one of the exhibit's creators noted, "the confrontation between popular memory and patriotic affirmation on the one hand, and the norms of historical research and argument on the other, could hardly be more starkly revealed."<sup>41</sup>

Analysis of the original *Enola Gay* exhibit plan raises many questions about the

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<sup>41</sup>Ibid.

intentions and perspectives of its planners. The first problem was that the proposed exhibit was meant to center around the *Enola Gay*, or at least that was the way it had been planned at the NASM. It was surprising then to find that the actual plane was mentioned only twice in the January 1994 script. The majority of the exhibit was not dedicated to the *Enola Gay*, but to the effects of the bombs upon Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The artifacts and pictures were almost solely from Japan, and there was no mention of the crew of the *Enola Gay*. In fact, the only American serviceman mentioned in the entire exhibit was Captain Claude Eatherly who flew a weather plane over Hiroshima one hour before the *Enola Gay* delivered its payload.<sup>42</sup> It is not difficult to understand why there were some who were concerned about the balance of the exhibit. Certainly, the Smithsonian had accurately portrayed the devastating aftermath of the explosion of two nuclear weapons over two Japanese cities, and this clearly met their goal of questioning nuclear armament. However, in a museum that had in the past been a bastion of support for American air power, eliminating any discussion of the American military proved unacceptable to veterans groups and conservative politicians. Veterans were upset at what they saw as an unbalanced portrayal of the end of the war in the Pacific.<sup>43</sup> It is hard to visualize where the *Enola Gay* would have been placed had the original exhibit gone up at the NASM. If the exhibit was intended to be centered strictly around the discussion of nuclear weaponry and its effects, then the *Enola Gay*, even though the bomber dropped

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<sup>42</sup>*Enola Gay* exhibit script draft. EG:400, January 12, 1994, 61-8.

<sup>43</sup>John T. Correll, "A Report on the Revisions" *Air Force Magazine*. June 28, 1994 <http://www.afa.org/enolagay/04-06.html>



the only atomic bomb ever used in warfare, should have been a peripheral part of the display. More appropriate centerpieces the museum might have considered include objects from the Manhattan Project and disarmed nuclear weapons.

The January 1995 version of the exhibit, "The Last Act: The Atomic Bomb and the End of World War II," appeared to have many improvements. The committee gained balance as it expanded its scope to include details of the Japanese-American conflict up to and beyond the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The *Enola Gay* becomes an object around which the discussion of nuclear power and its use can move with surprising ease. The plane is clearly a part of the exhibit. It is discussed in the context of the actual bombing and in terms of the technology of the World War II era. Its restoration is highlighted and the crew are mentioned in some detail. The brutality of war is shown with no apologies - both Japan and the U.S. are portrayed as aggressively pursuing the war, from Pearl Harbor to Nagasaki. There is some significant discussion about alternatives to using the atomic bomb and relevant government documents are cited.<sup>44</sup> The exhibit achieves an appropriate combination of education and presentation. Visitors to the exhibit would most likely have left with new information about the *Enola Gay* and nuclear power, and they would have been given the opportunity to decide for themselves whether or not the bomb should have been used against Japan.

The concern that most historians and scholars have about the Smithsonian's decision to scrap what appeared to be a very balanced exhibit, forged in the spirit of

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<sup>44</sup>The Last Act: The Atomic Bomb and the End of World War II, January 1995 (exhibit script)

compromise, is critical to understanding why military exhibits in particular will continue to be controversial. The very nature of war is aggressive; there is nothing fair or nice about it. Any questioning of tactical decisions made in wartime somehow seems to negate the risks taken by those who fought and died to implement those decisions. Questioning something like the use of nuclear weapons to end World War II creates opposition from those who feel that their lives were saved because they did not have to invade Japan. They were not the only ones who felt threatened by a less than positive endorsement of Truman's decision; conservative politicians were troubled enough to hold a Senate Hearing on *Enola Gay*. Chairman Ted Stevens (R-Alaska) said in his introductory remarks that the hearings "will provide the Smithsonian with the public forum necessary to explain what went wrong with their management practices, and what steps have been taken to correct the revisionist and 'politically correct' bias that was contained in the original script."<sup>45</sup> Stevens use of the terms revisionist and politically correct as negative labels for the original exhibit highlight his and many other conservative politicians' view that those who wrote the original script felt that dropping the bomb was wrong and wanted to mount an exhibition that vilified both that decision and the men who executed it. Five other senators attended the hearing: John Warner (R-VA), Thad Cochran (R-MS), Wendell Ford (D-KY), Claiborne Pell (D-RI), and Dianne Feinstein (D-CA). Also in attendance was Representative Sam Johnson (R-TX), the chair of the committee, who commented, "There is no excuse for an exhibit that addresses one

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<sup>45</sup>Page Putnam Miller, Director of the National Coordinating Committee for the Promotion of History, H-Asia "*Enola Gay*" Thread, <http://www2.h-net.msu.edu/~asia/threads/thrdenola.html>

of the most morally unambiguous events of the 20th century to need five revisions.”<sup>46</sup>

According to Stevens, the Senate Hearing’s stated objective was “not to tear down the Smithsonian but to ensure continuing public support of that great institution.”<sup>47</sup> To that end, the Committee on Rules and Administration, which has oversight of the Smithsonian, held two days of testimony. On Thursday, May 11, 1995 they heard from the Smithsonian’s critics who echoed a theme first addressed by Stevens in his opening remarks, that something “went wrong with the Smithsonian’s process, particularly what led the Smithsonian to propose a view of the events that took place at the end of World War II that is contrary to the memory of those who lived through the war.”<sup>48</sup> The following Thursday, May 18, 1995, Smithsonian supporters testified. Professor Edward Linenthal, who had served on the advisory committee for the NASM’s proposed *Enola Gay* exhibit, was first to speak. He attempted to provide some background for controversial exhibits and memorials like Little Big Horn and the U.S.S. Arizona. He also made it clear that he understood his obligation as a historian to “attend to this

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<sup>46</sup> Testimony criticizing the Smithsonian Institution and the NASM was given by Major General Charles W. Sweeney, USAF (Ret.), who flew on both atomic missions; Colonel Charles C. Cooper, Director of Publications, The Retired Officers Association (TROA); Herman G. Harrington, Chairman, National Internal Affairs Commission, American Legion; R. E. Smith, National President, Air Force Association (AFA); and Bob Manhan, Assistant Director, National Legislative Service, Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW). Edward T. Linenthal, Professor of Religion and American Culture, University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh; I. Michael Heyman, Secretary, Smithsonian Institution; Constance B. Newman, Undersecretary, Smithsonian Institution; and Thomas D. Crouch, Assistant Director for Aeronautics, NASM, testified in support of the Smithsonian Institution and the NASM. The hearings were held on May 11 and 18, 1995.

<sup>47</sup>U.S. Congress, Senate 1995, 2.

<sup>48</sup>*Ibid.*

[commemorative] voice, to listen carefully . . . [to] survivors.”<sup>49</sup> Linenthal also acknowledged the complications involved in attempting to balance the heroic and tragic narrative of the Bomb. Others spoke that day, but the response from the committee to any defense of the exhibit’s original intention can be summed up in the comments of Senator Wendell H. Ford:

It seems the professor [Linenthal] now is writing a chapter as it relates to this controversy. Whoever reads it is going to have his interpretation of who the bad guys are and who the good guys are, who wore the black hats and who wore the white hats . . . Your interpretation of this incident is going to be read by a lot of people, and they are going to believe it because it is the only one they have read . . . You start interpreting what happened here from all the reading, and we have some information, you have other information . . . And you will not, in your chapter, talk about the information we have . . . We are all caught in a Catch 22, and the politician will get the blame. You will get a royalty, and I hope that it is controversial enough that you make a lot of money.<sup>50</sup>

The *Enola Gay* exhibit, like any collection intended for public viewing is shaped and influenced by the opinions and backgrounds of the collectors, the agenda of the organization funding the collection, and the museum in which the collection will be housed. With all of these competing priorities, it becomes difficult to determine how certain collected items will be interpreted first by the curators of the exhibit, and second by the museum-going public. There is no way of knowing what the public’s reaction would have been if the 1995 *Enola Gay* exhibit had survived to completion. It is likely that the complaints of veterans would have been echoed by others, but the fact that many Americans who have no direct attachment to the memory of World War II might have left

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<sup>49</sup>U.S. Congress, Senate 1995, 47.

<sup>50</sup>U.S. Congress, Senate 1995, 63-4.

the exhibition with a new set of truths to ponder cannot be discounted.

The central problem with challenging the popular memory of World War II is that there are very few Americans who have no connection whatsoever to what historian Studs Terkel, in his collection of personal anecdotes about the era, calls the last “Good War.” Alongside those thankful veterans are their families, who may, like one angry man who telephoned a historian to criticize his recently published viewpoint on the use of the atomic bomb, credit their own existence to Truman’s decision:

While fellow historians and other scholars reacted positively, the scattered responses from outside academe proved uniformly hostile. An early-morning telephone call, for example, came from a gentleman . . . who, though born after the war, was the son of a veteran who had fought in the Pacific. My caller therefore insisted that he also owed his life to the atomic bomb, since if his future father had died in an invasion of Japan, he, the son, would never have been conceived.<sup>51</sup>

The larger implication of that comment seems to be that the destruction of Hiroshima and Nagasaki was extremely beneficial for the descendants of all servicemen who were stationed in the Pacific Theater and would likely have been involved in an invasion of Japan. Their memory of this event has been shaped by the personal effects they perceive it had upon their lives and by the belief that all wars the United States fought (until Vietnam) were conducted with honor, righteousness and justice. The Smithsonian underestimated the importance of that shared memory in choosing the fiftieth anniversary of the end of World War II to question what is still largely seen by the public as a wise decision that saved many American, and Japanese, lives.

Was there any way that the NASM could have incorporated public memory into

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<sup>51</sup>Linenthal and Engelhardt, 137.

their planned exhibition? As early as August 1993 the Air Force Association (AFA) was involved in following up on reports from a group of B-29 veterans who felt that the NASM was “going wrong” with its plans for the *Enola Gay* exhibit.<sup>52</sup> The Retired Officers Association (TROA) became involved in the spring of 1994 and contacted Dr. Martin Harwit to discuss their concerns. A luncheon was arranged which included representatives from the AFA, the American Legion, Disabled American Veterans, the Military Order of the World Wars, TROA, and the Veterans of Foreign Wars. Also present were staff members of the NASM, the Department of Defense 50th Anniversary Commemorative Committee, and the House Veterans Affairs Committee. The discussion at the luncheon was lively and TROA followed up with their recommendations to Harwit in July. Revisions were made but the veterans groups felt that their concerns over the lack of historical background leading up to the *Enola Gay*’s mission and a dearth of information about Japanese aggression were not being adequately addressed. They also felt that the post-war nuclear age information was at best peripheral to any commemoration of the end of World War II.<sup>53</sup> These concerns led to the formation of a six-member “Tiger Team” at the request of Harwit himself. The members of the team were Brigadier General William M. Constantine, USAF (Ret.), volunteer NASM docent and Team Chairman; Colonel Thomas Alison, USAF (Ret.), NASM Curator for Military Aviation; Dr. Gregg Herken, Historian and Chairman, NASM Department of Space History; Colonel Donald Lopez, USAF (Ret.), former NASM Deputy Director and Senior

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<sup>52</sup>U.S. Congress, Senate 1995, 28 - testimony of Gene Smith, President, AFA

<sup>53</sup>Ibid, 14 - testimony of Charles D. Cooper, Director of Publications, TROA

Advisor Emeritus; Kenneth Robert, NASM volunteer docent; and Dr. Steven Soter, Special Assistant to the Director, NASM and Team Secretary. The team's charge was to review the entire script with a particular eye for imbalance in the portrayal of the Japanese and the Americans.<sup>54</sup>

In reviewing the report submitted by the "Tiger Team" investigating the 1994 script, it appears that the majority of the information that is in question is not related to American perceptions of war. In fact, according to that report, information relating to the American memory seems to be missing from the exhibit entirely:

Imbalance: Treatment of Japanese vs. U.S. home fronts. Descriptions of Japanese homefront in 1945 convey an overly sympathetic tone in comparison with the U.S. The text cites specific examples of hardship, shortages of food and clothing, and deprivation among the Japanese. In contrast, "Homefront U.S.A." is likely to be perceived by the viewing public as a land of high wages and good times. There is little or no mention of grief at losses of loved ones, numbers of American casualties, or other sympathetic examples of personal hardship and suffering on the U.S. homefront. The text needs to say more than "Americans were tired of the War" to balance perceptions of the home fronts.<sup>55</sup>

The term "imbalance" appears repeatedly in the report, and after several pages becomes the battle cry of the review team. They perceived the script as imbalanced, heavily favoring the Japanese perspective of the Pacific Theater in 1945 and the aftermath of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It is not surprising that many veterans were offended by the exhibit as there appears to be little if any of the expected American narrative in the text - the approval of Truman's decision to drop the bomb and the acceptance of the higher

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<sup>54</sup>Report of the National Air and Space Museum Review Team, <http://www.afa.org/enolagay/05-03.html>, May 25, 1994, 1.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid, 2.

death toll estimates provided to the public in 1945 are absent from the discussion. In fact, one of the major stumbling blocks of the exhibit negotiations centered around death toll estimates that were significantly lower than those of 500,000 to one million released publicly by the Truman administration.<sup>56</sup> Though most veterans were opposed to the use of current historical information about the use of nuclear weapons in Japan, others like Lloyd Cutler, a member of the Army Special Branch, had special insight into the use of the atomic bomb on Japan:

We knew from the Japanese messages that they had authorized their ambassador in Moscow . . . to open negotiations for peace. The Russians never told us, but we knew . . . Averell Harriman and others argued against [using the bomb] since Japan was ready to surrender anyway. They didn't prevail.<sup>57</sup>

Cutler went on to state his approval for the bombing of Hiroshima, despite his knowledge of Japan's plans to surrender. In his mind Hiroshima served as a deterrent against using nuclear weapons because of the horrible destruction and loss of life. However, he was not in favor of the second bombing. In contrast, Charles Briscoe, who participated in the initial development of the B-29 bomber, echoed the sentiments of many vets in the Pacific theater saying he "realized it was sad that all those Japanese died, but how many Americans would have been killed without the atomic bomb?"<sup>58</sup> This question is central to the argument surrounding the 1994 and 1995 scripts' data about the decision to drop the bomb and in retrospect it is clear that the controversy surrounding the death toll

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<sup>56</sup>1995 exhibit script

<sup>57</sup>Tom Brokaw, The Greatest Generation (New York: Random House, Inc, 1998), 367.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid, 94.



numbers indicates those figures were not as clearly defined as the American public was originally led to believe.

Had the Smithsonian made it a priority to gather oral histories from veterans and their families and from the victims of Hiroshima and Nagasaki and their families they would have discovered a complex interwoven tale that while sparking controversy because of the different memories and consequences of these events would also have enriched the exhibit experience. Oral history is “one part of the struggle of memory against forgetting, where people talk about the past - and others listen to remember.”<sup>59</sup> It plays an important role in gathering the memories of those who participated in significant historical events. Studs Terkel and Tom Brokaw, author of The Greatest Generation, both focus on World War II in their books which together include interviews of almost two hundred people, men and women, famous and ordinary. These interviews give the reader almost two hundred perspectives on World War II - many of them may echo similar sentiments, but they each witnessed and experienced the war in their own individual way. Though Brokaw has selected a celebratory perspective for his oral history and Terkel a more critical and broad-based selection, the two are careful to let their subjects do the talking and not guide the responses.

Collecting memories through oral history is important, but it is also complicated by the passage of time and the influence of mitigating factors (like the media, fiction, etc.) on individual memories. The trauma of events like war can make remembering them difficult at best; sometimes it is easier to adopt others' memories (even fictional ones)

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<sup>59</sup>Michael Staub, “Speak Memory,” *The Nation*, 16 September 1991, 309.

than to recall one's own experiences. Using oral history is helpful, particularly because it personalizes events that may not be familiar to everyone. Terkel introduces his collection by explaining its significance:

The memory of the rifleman is what this book is about; and of his sudden comrades, thrown, hugger-mugger, together; and of those men, women, and children on the home front who knew or did not know what the shouting was all about; and of occasional actors from other worlds, accidentally encountered; and of lives lost and bucks found. And of a moment in history [that to many is] just a story in the past.<sup>60</sup>

Those, like Terkel and Brokaw, who collect oral history may also be biased by information they are specifically looking for - they may choose to incorporate or leave out stories based on the narrative they are trying to create. In some instances the usefulness of oral history is overshadowed by the collector's manipulation, so it should never be the sole source of historical information

Knowing that the NASM initially planned only to collect the memories that were focused on the horrific experience of war on the Japanese homefront in World War II - a war which culminated in the destruction of two cities by atomic bombs - might change one's viewpoint of the controversy that swirled around the exhibit. Perhaps the outrage of veterans at an exhibit about the war which has no resonance with their memories of that event might be more justified in light of that revelation. Alternately, although the original 1994 script may have been flawed, the 1995 draft would certainly have created a more personal and inspiring exhibit than the design which eventually won out and existed at the Smithsonian until May 1998. The exhibit format that finally "won" was introduced

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<sup>60</sup>Studs Terkel, "The Good War": An Oral History of World War II (New York: The New Press, 1984), 3.

at its entrance with a letter from Secretary Heyman noting the controversy surrounding the *Enola Gay*. The entrance hall included photographs of different types of bombers including the year of construction for each model and what their capabilities were. The fuselage of the *Enola Gay*, with its distinctive “R” marking is reconstructed in the next room, and it is accompanied by an explanation of its markings and by some glass cases with original plane components. The following room has a video about the restoration of the plane and some large black and white pictures of the crew. The largest room in the exhibition contains the bomb bay with the casings for Little Boy and Fat Man. Extensive information on the 509th Bomber Group and the training on Tinian is presented on the wall panels, which include more pictures of the crew and the plane. The final room of the exhibit is papered with newspaper headlines about the dropping of the bomb and Japan’s surrender. In this room visitors can watch a thirteen minute video about the crew of the plane.<sup>61</sup>

The 1995 exhibit (which never came to be) presented a well-rounded view of both the Japanese and American home fronts, and gave important background information about the hostilities between the U.S. and Japan leading up to the Hiroshima bombing. However, the Veterans of Foreign Wars and the Air Force Association would not budge from their belief that the Smithsonian was deliberately trying to undermine the nation’s glorious, patriotic memories of World War II. When Smithsonian Secretary I. Michael Heyman refused to support Martin O. Harwit, the director of the NASM, Harwit resigned and Heyman took on the exhibit, reducing it to the sterile display that was

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<sup>61</sup>My personal photographs and notes from the exhibit.

opened to the public.

The lesson that museums have very explicitly learned in the aftermath of the *Enola Gay* exhibit is that “politics can be brought to bear to shape historical interpretation.”<sup>62</sup> Cultural institutions alone are simply not able to resolve conflicting opinions about particular wartime acts, and because of those debates there is little hope of using a federally funded museum as a staging ground for a thought-provoking excursion into the recent past. The possibility of any rational exchange of ideas is eliminated when lobbying a congressperson becomes the preferred method of expressing discontent with an exhibit’s planned content. Now that the lifeless NASM exhibit has been closed (for roof repairs to that wing of the building), the *Enola Gay*’s future home will be in an airport. Dulles International Airport in Chantilly, Virginia plans to open an NASM annex in 2003; the completely assembled *Enola Gay* will be displayed there.

### **The Vietnam Era Educational Center**

Despite the seeming inability of historians and veterans to agree on how to present war in a public forum such as a museum, there is one exhibit which has defied the odds and meshed conflicting viewpoints, but not without dispute. In 1995, around the time the *Enola Gay* exhibition opened, a group of Atlantic City casinos announced they were donating \$3.8 million to finance the construction of the nation’s first museum committed to memorializing the Vietnam War. Located in Holmdel, New Jersey, next to the New Jersey Vietnam Veterans’ Memorial, the Vietnam Era Educational Center is “a place

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<sup>62</sup>Linenthal & Engelhardt, 153-4.

dedicated to the meaning, as well as to the memory, of the Vietnam conflict.”<sup>63</sup>

Describing the center’s mission seems easy now, but in the three years following the announcement of the casinos’ gift, a vicious debate raged “between those who believe that the war was profoundly immoral . . . and those who believe that the failure to pursue the war to military victory was evidence of moral failure, that the peace movement sold the nation down the drain.”<sup>64</sup>

The committee originally charged with planning the content of the center comprised academic historians, political scientists, teachers, veterans, and museum specialists. Though the specific details are unclear because of the unwillingness of original committee members to place blame, what is evident is that one or more members of the original committee were not happy with the way veterans were portrayed in the initial script. According to committee member and historian Howard Green, pieces of the text were selectively leaked by one or more of the displeased committee members to the local veterans’ community and the media in an attempt to create a firestorm which would either completely alter the script or scrap the idea altogether. When the controversy hit, the committee, which originally had five Vietnam veterans, one Korean war veteran and 11 non-veterans, was modified to include eight more Vietnam veterans and one less non-vet<sup>65</sup>, bringing the totals to 14 and 10 respectively. Its task was to examine the script and

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<sup>63</sup>Vietnam Era Educational Center Visitor’s brochure

<sup>64</sup>Amy Westfeldt, The Associated Press, “First Vietnam era museum opens after years of debate,” *The Daily Press*, 27 September 1998, A5.

<sup>65</sup>Information about the identity of the one committee member who left was not made available. It is unclear whether this non-veteran decided to leave voluntarily or was

make suitable alterations. The NASM scrapped its original concept altogether in favor of an exhibit about the B-29 bomber that almost entirely avoided the subject of nuclear weapons. The Vietnam Era Educational Center could not avoid the Vietnam War, so its revision committee rewrote “every word of the museum’s text panels, and argu[ed] about the role of the media, the legitimacy of the anti-war movement and whether the war could have been won.”<sup>66</sup> From 1995 until 1998, the committee worked hard to hammer out disagreements and create what they felt was a well-balanced, thought-provoking exhibit.

Unfortunately, some critics like Vietnam expert Robert Brigham, felt that the committee “tried so hard to be objective that it failed to make a point.”<sup>67</sup> The center’s discussion of anti-war protests was criticized by many scholars, including Mitchell Hall, because “it overemphasizes the militant fringe wing and de-emphasizes the moderate mainstream.”<sup>68</sup> Even in an exhibit that was broken down and rebuilt by a committee created for the sole purpose of bringing balance some groups’ voices are privileged over the voices of others. An interview with Green, who was one of three committee members chosen to edit the final script, helped to crystallize some of the main issues surrounding the exhibit. Green believes strongly that the committee should have chosen “a ranking scholar rather than a graduate student”<sup>69</sup> to write the initial script - Meredith H. Lair, a

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asked to resign from the committee.

<sup>66</sup>Westfeldt, A5

<sup>67</sup>Ibid.

<sup>68</sup>Ibid.

<sup>69</sup>Green, Howard, phone interview with author 9/15/99

graduate student in the history department at Penn State University, was chosen by the original committee for her balanced perspective. Lair's father was a Vietnam veteran and she was studying under Professor Bill Duiker, author of The Communist Road to Power in Vietnam, Vietnam: Revolution in Transition, and Sacred War: Nationalism and Revolution in a Divided Vietnam. When her original script, which Green thought was not very problematic, was intentionally leaked to the local media and the veterans' community, a few "unfriendlies"<sup>70</sup> sought to create an *Enola Gay*-type controversy. Although members of the press attended the first few content committee meetings, they soon became bored with the proceedings, for the script was reviewed word by word. According to Green, the major problem the committee faced was overcoming the concept of "one voice for all veterans." Those who felt that voice was being lost monopolized the debate with lots of small matters, but they could not derail the process. The My Lai massacre was "one of the sorest points . . . [with much debate about] how to characterize what its moral was."<sup>71</sup> Ultimately, the final script only addressed the discovery of the incident and the embarrassment it brought to most Vietnam soldiers. Another major controversy arose over the size of the anti-war organization Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW). Green was disappointed by the desire of many committee members to downplay the organization and therefore minimize any discussion of anti-war sentiment among veterans. The irony of the painstaking months spent on the label text is that it comprises only a fraction of the center. Photos, video, and artifacts all have a much

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<sup>70</sup>Green, 9/15/99

<sup>71</sup>Ibid

greater impact on visitors, says Green, who is featured as the lone anti-war talking head in the video sequence, and there was much less struggle over the visual components of the center.<sup>72</sup>

Many of the potential debates the museum could have sparked were dealt with in the revision committee, and there appear to be few imbalances in the exhibits. Some critics charged that the exhibit failed to address the anti-war movement from all perspectives. America's domestic situation is covered in great detail, from Johnson's Great Society plans, to the Civil Rights Movement and Watergate. Veterans felt that the original text was unfavorable to American military personnel and overemphasized the anti-war movement and drug use. Now, they are generally pleased to be able to visit the center which displays "letters between soldiers and their families . . . videotaped testimony by some veterans . . . [and] passages about its legacy, including post-traumatic stress disorder, the effects of Agent Orange and the myth of the Vietnam veteran as a "dangerously violent, substance-abusing, stressed-out failure."<sup>73</sup> A pamphlet promoting the center touts it as "a place dedicated to telling the full story of the Vietnam War, as seen from the front lines, as well as from the home front."<sup>74</sup> One prominently bold typeset line in the visitor's brochure states "From land mines to peace signs," seemingly indicating the inclusiveness of the material presented at the center. However, though the

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<sup>72</sup>Watts, Kelly, phone interview with author, 9/8/99.

<sup>73</sup>*The Vietnam Era Educational Center Visitor's Brochure*. Holmdel: Princeton Partners, Inc., 1998.

<sup>74</sup>*Ibid.*



center further includes its visitors by inviting veterans and their families and friends to submit photographs, letters, and other materials to the museum's collection, and encouraging Vietnam veterans to become volunteer docents, there are no similar invitations to those who protested the war.

## **Conclusion**

None of these exhibits and memorials escaped controversy unscathed. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial added an American flag, the phrase 'God Bless America,' and a statue of three soldiers before it opened in 1982. Since that time another statue of Vietnam's female veterans has been added. The original *Enola Gay* exhibit and its exploration of nuclear destruction was done away with in favor of a more technical display of the plane. The Vietnam Era Educational Center label text took three years to rewrite before it was acceptable to the revision committee. In each of these three cases, as in so many other instances, the "powerful and dominant interests of patriots and nationalists could not let a text composed only by and about ordinary people and ordinary emotions stand alone."<sup>75</sup> Special interest groups like the VFW, the American Legion, and TROA more often than not are represented by prominent politicians and powerful lobbying groups, both of which insist that they are the guardians of the one and only truth. It is this insistence on control of information and concomitant limiting of opinions available to the broader public that frustrates the possibilities for maximizing the educational value of war exhibits. Scholar George Lipsitz discusses the importance of realizing that there is no single story to be told in his work stressing that "the plurality of

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<sup>75</sup>Bodnar, 6

views provoked [by an exhibit leaves] no one correct [meaning], but, instead, provide[s] a locus of meanings intersecting around the content . . . and the lived experiences of its viewers.”<sup>76</sup> Simply stated, there is an intrinsic value in incorporating as many varying perspectives as possible in an exhibit. Rather than watering down the presentation, such an approach enriches it by presenting divergent ideas and offering a diverse group of people the opportunity to explore different opinions.

If we want to educate ourselves about the myths and realities of war, if we want to honor veterans and acknowledge the decisions of policy makers, if we want to open up a forum for discussion and debate of a past that is at once distant and oppressive, then we must acknowledge the power of presenting the facts as we know them alongside the latest scholarship and the personal stories from those who were ‘there.’ Until we can accept the existence of many divergent perspectives, the controversies over intention that have plagued war exhibits and memorials for the past twenty years will continue. Though multiple voices may prevent Americans from achieving a single national identity, they enrich visitors’ experiences and add to their collective understanding of U.S. history.

In the aftermath of the *Enola Gay* exhibit, the National Museum of American History (NMAH) staged their own exhibition commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the end of World War II. It was titled “World War II: Sharing Memories.” In describing the aim of this exhibit, curator Steven Lubar comments:

We all do remember the war. We remember it in family stories, national mythology, the history we learned in school, and the movies we saw on television

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<sup>76</sup>George Lipsitz, Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1990), xv.

. . . We wanted our visitors to think not only about the war but also about how we know the past, about the ways that memory and tradition relate to history and historic artifacts.<sup>77</sup>

The NMAH used objects of everyday life to encourage museum visitors to relate their feelings about and experiences during the war, and then they collected those memories in notebooks positioned throughout the exhibit. The stories they collected ranged from heroic events to tragic loss, but the collection of these memories proved that Americans felt an incredible connectedness to World War II; even those Americans who had not been born during the era had some recollection of the war passed down from parents and grandparents. The mission of this exhibit was to give museum visitors the opportunity to remember in their own way and museum curators the opportunity to collect those memories. It successfully created an interactive environment which gave everyone who encountered the exhibit the opportunity to participate, to remember, to relate, and to learn from each other.<sup>78</sup>

In writing about the failures of the *Enola Gay* exhibit, historian Tom Engelhardt contends that it is no longer possible to “approach a memorial to war dead as if entering a glorious story in which individual sacrifice led to national enhancement.”<sup>79</sup> Engelhardt’s statement also applies to the exhibition of war artifacts and memorabilia. When museums and memorials “talk about” or “represent” war they have to engage with at least

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<sup>77</sup>Henderson & Kaeppler, 15.

<sup>78</sup>Ibid.

<sup>79</sup>Edward Linenthal & Tom Engelhardt, eds., History Wars: The *Enola Gay* and Other Battles for the American Past, “The Victors and the Vanquished,” by Tom Engelhardt (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1996), 221.

two languages:

Official culture relies on ‘dogmatic formalism’ and the restatement of reality in ideal rather than complex or ambiguous terms . . . Vernacular culture . . . represents an array of special interests that are grounded in parts of the whole. They are diverse and changing and can be reformulated from time to time by the creation of new social units . . . They can even clash with one another.<sup>80</sup>

Official cultural renditions of conflicts often neglect the personal, human stories in favor of the ‘God and country’ approach to the sacrifices of war. In contrast, vernacular cultural representational philosophies emphasize the importance of approaching war from all sides, stirring up conflicting viewpoints, opening old wounds, and questioning accepted truths. It is possible to live in both of those cultures, and that is how museums should begin to approach their exhibits of war. Rather than fearing the conflicting perspectives and emotions that multiple people bring to any memorial or museum, museum curators, scholars, veterans, and politicians should relish the opportunity to hear as many different realities as possible and to catalog them all for the human record. For some, the war experience must remain private and unarticulated. But that does not mean that war exhibits must be devoid of emotion. Individuals can and will bring their own memories and derive their own meaning from what they are viewing. Museum-goers need to be credited with the ability to view something that elicits more than one possible response. As one curator noted, more often than not,

the public is demanding to be considered a partner in the creation of meaning. This is good, but the trick is how to share authority with our public while not simply abandoning the job of the curator and the historian to those who have the political clout to demand that their own historical truths . . . be given the

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<sup>80</sup>Bodnar, 13-4.

museum's endorsement.<sup>81</sup>

Museums are now in a position to tell a many-sided story, drawing on veterans' first-hand accounts, government documents, print and broadcast media archives, memories of soldiers' relatives, letters, and many other untapped resources. As scholars Amy Henderson and Adrienne Kaeppler maintain, "the debate over history and memory has illustrated at least one truth: Today there is no single, overarching agreement on historical truth. And because there are many histories, it follows that there are many ways of understanding."<sup>82</sup> It is unthinkable, for instance, that curators or exhibit creators would presume to tell the story of any war without considering the home fronts of all nations involved. The *Enola Gay* cannot be reasonably discussed without talking about Hiroshima or Pearl Harbor, nor can a museum focusing on Vietnam not incorporate both the death of innocent Vietnamese civilians and the terror and the loss of life during the stress that American soldiers in Vietnam dealt with every day. Vietnam veterans' participation in the conflict cannot be memorialized without also some reference to sacrifices that will always be grieved and never be celebrated.

A war is not merely a series of battles or a conflict of ideologies; war cannot be discussed simply in terms of territory won and lost or the number of casualties on either side. War affects everyone and everything, from military personnel and their families to industry and the economy. There is no single truth to war; rather there are multiple truths, each reflecting the experiences of an individual or group of people. Mounting a

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<sup>81</sup>Henderson & Kaeppler, 24.

<sup>82</sup>Ibid, 4-5.

successful exhibition means acknowledging the fact that there are many stories to be told and making every effort not to privilege one over another. Curators, historians, and veterans must work together to ensure that many divergent voices are heard in war exhibits. Both the official and the vernacular cultures must be acknowledged in order to appropriately recognize the sacrifice of veterans and to finally accept the United States' ignominious defeats alongside its glorious victories.

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